



London Borough of Tower Hamlets

**Report of the Scrutiny Review Working Group on
Child Poverty**

DRAFT

May 2009

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Acknowledgments

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The contributions of all those involved has helped to shape the final recommendations which are contained within this report and pose exciting challenges for Councillors, Council Officers and our partners.

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London Borough of Tower Hamlets

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Contribution to focus groups were received from the following organisations and some of their service users:

The Mobile Single Parents Project
Lansbury Lodge Women’s Project – City Gateway
Tower Hamlets Schools Cluster Working Group – One Plus Working Group
Tower Hamlets Citizens Advice Bureau
Reed in Partnership
Individual residents contributed following an article in East End Life
Residents contribution through the One Tower Hamlets Interviews

Visits were made to the following:

Family Nurse Partnership - Visit of Professor David Olds
Woman for Change Conference - The Asian Health Agency

Chair's Foreword

The Government has set ambitious targets to eradicate child poverty by 2020. These have been nationally accepted as a challenge. This is even more so in Tower Hamlets, recognised as a borough with high levels of child poverty.

The Tower Hamlets profile on poverty is a historic one. The borough has for hundreds of years been a refuge for people escaping war or hunger. It is a challenge for the Council and its partners to make a really effective impact on poverty. Ever increasing focus and funding over many years has not worked to lessen poverty in the borough as much as was hoped, and we have to continue to find new ways of supporting our residents. There is a strong commitment to tackling inequality in Tower Hamlets. This is supported by the Community Plan theme of One Tower Hamlets. There is also a strong desire here by local Councillors to challenge inequalities which can undermine cohesion and child poverty sits at the heart of this.

My hope in choosing to review child poverty was to find out what our residents point of view was about the ease of access to services, and to use their testimony to make the system work better for them. The Working Group hoped also to gain more insight into other areas, such as what the problems are on employment, especially for women. A number of focus groups, visits and interviews took place with local residents to bring greater understanding and an equalities perspective to child poverty. This method of evidence collection has not been tested before and has been a useful way to bring in the experiences of local residents. This has been invaluable in informing the review, identifying particular issues around access to services and has been used to inform the recommendations of this review.

The main feeling that came through right from the first focus group onwards was that exclusion whether real or felt was the crucial factor here. The extent to which exclusion prevents access to needed help, through hard or impossible to negotiate processes, and that a history of felt exclusion personally, or within a family or community prevents a person from coming forward. Those that are able to come forward do so and, when they do, we have to ensure that real usable practical help is available. The biggest problem is those that do not come forward, and how we find more ways to reach them.

As an entirely personal comment, I have to add here that from all the areas we considered, I felt that the Council could do with an equality strand for poverty, due to it having an all pervading effect on a person's life and prospects. That many who exist for a long time in this position can lose, or indeed, never gain the ability and the means to participate fully in the community. It may be that we have not made as much impact as would be hoped due to this factor not being included in considerations beyond that of the financial one.

This review has been even more eye opening than I thought it would be. The One Tower Hamlets Interviews in particular have been invaluable in providing real insight into residents' lives beyond the information we pick up from the case-work we do. The review is well timed in that it coincides with the development of the 'Tackling Child Poverty Strategy' and we're pleased to have been able to contribute to this.

The recommendations outlined in this report are intended to support the work of the Council and its partners. The Working Group recognises the Beacon award for Tackling Child Poverty and hope that the recommendations of this review will further develop our work. We hope all the parties involved will take the opportunity to address the issues highlighted in this report.

Finally, I would like to thank Jebin Syeda and the Scrutiny team, and all the Councillors and officers who participated in this review, and in particular the residents who spoke to us, and were very honest and open when discussing issues, my heartfelt thanks to them.

Councillor Ann Jackson
Scrutiny Lead, One Tower Hamlets

Introduction and recommendations

Introduction

1. The proportion of children living in poverty in Tower Hamlets is higher than elsewhere in England. The borough is ranked as the third most deprived in the country. It is a place of deprivation where 66% of our children live in families who earn less than 60% of the national median income and 46% live in benefit dependant households. The deprivation disproportionately impacts children as we have a young population. We know that over 50% of children are eligible for free school meals which is the highest in the country. The borough has benefited from rapid economic growth particularly linked to Canary Wharf yet this wealth and prosperity is not shared by all local families and many continue to live in poverty. Therefore, child poverty is a critical local issue.
2. The Child Poverty Scrutiny Review Working Group was established in October 2008 and undertook research over six months. The inequality created by poverty undermines cohesion and impacts on the life chances of people often for generations. Recognising the link between income, access and life opportunities, the Working Group was keen to explore employment issues, focusing particularly on the barriers to employment.
3. Given the Community Plan's aspiration of One Tower Hamlets and its emphasis on community leadership, the Working Group were keen to strengthen our understanding of community leadership where Members use the experiences of their constituents to develop better policies and services.
4. The main aim of the review therefore was to consider a community leadership model which contributes to creating One Tower Hamlets using child poverty as a case study. In focusing on this, the Working Group considered the following:
 - Key issues related to child poverty including:
 - English for Speakers of other Languages and courses to improve literacy and numeracy skills;
 - Access to employment, including childcare provisions;
 - The London Child Poverty Pledge;
 - The Employment Strategy;
 - The role of Job Centre Plus.
 - Use Members' experience to develop a greater understanding, through research, focus groups and interviews, of the experience of local people living in poverty;
 - Establish how the research and casework element of Members' work can be used to help develop the Tackling Child Poverty Strategy;
 - Access information available to Members to exercise their community leadership role;
 - Develop and test and evaluate a model of community leadership role for strengthening One Tower Hamlets.

5. The Working Group undertook a number of focus groups and one-to-one interviews (One Tower Hamlets Interviews) with residents to examine the barriers faced in gaining employment. The Interviews in particular attempted to capture the experiences and barriers for residents from a range of backgrounds. These have been useful in framing recommendations of this review.
6. Having considered the evidence, the Working Group have made a number of recommendations which should help to strengthen community leadership in Tower Hamlets and begin to address the issues identified in tackling child poverty. The Working Group commends the achievement of Beacon status on tackling child poverty and recognises that excellent progress has been made particularly in supporting young people to ensure future generations do not fall into the poverty trap. The recommendations put forward in this report therefore focus more on supporting adults and families which would include children and young people. The Working Group also welcomes the development of the Child Poverty Strategy and the opportunity to contribute to it.

7. Recommendations

- A. That the Tower Hamlets Partnership develop on-going programmes to support specific groups facing barriers to employment;**
- B. That the Health and Employment Group consider the role of GPs in identifying ways of breaking the cycle of long term sickness for those with support needs;**
- C. That Children's Services ensures that assessments, including Common Assessment Framework and Core Assessments include debt management considerations and whether financial advice is required as part of action planning;**
- D. That Children's Services develop and train front line staff at Children's Centres to deliver debt management and financial advice in partnership with locally based organisations such as the Financial Services Authority and third sector organisations;**
- E. That the External Funding Team in Development and Renewal consider how financial inclusion and debt management might be further promoted through wider publicity in East End Life and through the publications of key local agencies;**
- F. That Tower Hamlets Partnership re-consider its position and use of data to review the support needed to get women into employment with a particular focus on supporting Bengali women;**
- G. That the ESOL Providers Action Group explores ways to improve the referral process to employment advice and opportunities for students who have completed courses;**

- H. That Children’s Services strengthen the promotion of the role of Children’s Centres and childcare support through East End Life and the publications of other partner agencies;**
- I. That Tower Hamlets Partnership should continue to support ESOL financially and identify targeted funding for women who may not meet the financial threshold for assistance and where they are not able to gain access to the household income;**
- J. That the Cabinet in partnership with the Learning Skills Council lobby government to increase funding for ESOL;**
- K. That Jobcentre Plus review customer experience and case management with a view to improving the experiences of local people;**
- L. That the Cabinet lobby Department of Work and Pensions to review how the benefits payment system can be improved to make prompt payments and support people so as not to fall further into poverty;**
- M. That the Partnership explores ways to improve employment opportunities for the Somali community including the use of outreach work;**
- N. That the Council should sign-up to the London Child Poverty Pledge and encourage partners including the PCT, Canary Wharf and Olympics Authority to sign and use the Pledge to respond to the employment needs of local people;**
- O. That the Council explore ways of increasing the participation of new communities in the democratic process;**
- P. That local BME media is used to increase awareness of how local democracy works and how it can address local issues for example unemployment and to champion positive stories about parental employment;**
- Q. That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee undertake a Scrutiny Review exploring how the development of community leadership across the partnership could be improved and further explore how the One Tower Hamlets Interview model can be used to support this;**
- R. That the Strategy and Performance Team further develop the THIS Borough system to improve support to Members.**

Background

8. Access to employment and opportunities for developing skills to gain employment are all crucial determinants of the quality of life and opportunities for families to pull themselves out of poverty. Government definitions of poverty are based on the level of income available to a household. High levels of child poverty are driven by high levels of worklessness amongst parents. It is important that we provide opportunities for equipping local people to develop skills into employment.
9. The Government has set ambitious targets to eradicate child poverty by 2020. London remains a place for high levels of poverty. In 2006, whilst nationally 15 % of children were living in households where no one had a job, in London the figure is 25%. The official definition of poverty is defined as households with less than 60% of median income equivalised after housing costs. In Tower Hamlets 66% of children live in these households, the London figure is 51%. ¹ This inequality means a range of things for local residents in terms of life experiences, and poses a significant challenge to the Council and our partners to develop ways to tackle this inequality.
10. Good community leadership has become more and more important in leading change in local authority, for instance in the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 and more recently the Communities in Control White Paper. There is currently no shared concept of community leadership for councillors. The Working Group considered child poverty an appropriate subject given its local significance to test a community leadership model.

Child Poverty – Regional perspective

11. The negative experiences of poverty has detrimental impact on the outcomes for individuals and society. Addressing child poverty issues can therefore bring about positive outcomes. London has received much focus because it has the highest rates of child poverty. Key Headline figures are as below:
 - 48% of children in London live in poverty, this is the highest in the UK;
 - In London children are more likely to be living in families were at least one adult is claiming a key benefit – 28% compared to 19% nationally while in Tower Hamlets it is 49%;
 - 25% of London’s children live in households where no one works. Children from ethnic minority groups, particularly Bangladeshi and mixed White and Black Caribbean children are more likely to be living in workless households;
 - Employment rates are particularly low for the mothers in the following groups: those with no qualifications (20%) disabled mothers (34%) BME mothers (46%) and those born outside the UK (44%), Consequently children from these households are at the highest risk of living in poverty.
12. Given the high levels of poverty in London, the Government set up the London Child Poverty Commission. Adopting the Government’s measure of child poverty of households living on below 60% of the national median income, it has developed a London Child Poverty Pledge which sets out actions that organisations can undertake to improve parental employment.

¹ Capital Gains, London Child Poverty Commission, 2008
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13. The Child Poverty Commission report² established that families in London are more likely to be deeper in poverty, more likely to be without a job, to have fewer choices about their housing and to face multiple disadvantages. The report establishes that the underlying causes of child poverty are low employment rates amongst parents. It identifies particular groups who may be disadvantaged – mothers, fathers with English as second language, parents with a disability or mental illness, and parents trapped in low skilled jobs. There are many residents of Tower Hamlets who fall into these categories.

Child Poverty – Local perspective

14. Tower Hamlets is a young borough and the role of the family plays an enormous influence on both private and public life. This creates a solid platform for tackling child poverty and making a lasting difference to children and families. At the same time the depth of the problem is enormous. Some key issues include:

- 33% of the population is of Bangladeshi origin, the majority of whom English would be a second language, with emerging new communities;
- Just under 30% of the total population is under 19 years of age;³
- There are low levels of numeracy and literacy skills with high demand for ESOL;
- There is inter-generational worklessness;
- At 49% Tower Hamlets has the second highest proportion of economically inactive working age women in Great Britain. For Bangladeshi women the rate is 75.2%.⁴

15. Many of the disadvantaged household types that have been identified by the London Child Poverty Commission as more likely to be living in poverty are to be found in the borough.

Income levels

16. Over the last ten years the borough has seen job growth outstrip that in London - 56% locally compared to 7.7% in London, with 2 jobs for every economically active resident. Yet there are high levels of unemployment.⁵ The Working Group was therefore keen to identify the barriers faced by local people.

17. Based on Office of National Statistics mid-year population estimates (2007) 71% of the local population are of working age, 31% of these are economically inactive. The table below⁶ shows that the full-time workers' gross weekly pay in Tower Hamlets in

2008 would have been £633 whilst the London median income equivalent is £580.

18. This figure is a reflection of the number of workers in Canary Wharf who may be on significantly high levels of pay. At the same time almost 18% of

² Capital Gains, London Child Poverty Commission, 2008

³ Tower Hamlets Children and Young People's Strategic Plan, 2006-2009

⁴ Annual Local Labour Force Survey 2003/04

⁵ Employment Strategy, Tower Hamlets Local Strategic Partnership, November 2008

⁶ NOMIS, Office for National Statistics

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families in Tower Hamlets live on an annual income of less than £15,000⁷. The figures also show that there is a considerable difference in pay by gender.

Earnings by residence (2008)

	Tower Hamlets (pounds)	London (pounds)	Great Britain (pounds)
Gross weekly pay			
Full-time workers	633.1	580.8	479.3
Male full-time workers	680.6	630.0	525.0
Female full-time workers	554.5	534.5	412.7
Hourly pay			
Full-time workers	16.70	15.09	12.01
Male full-time workers	17.91	15.84	12.72
Female full-time workers	14.88	14.35	10.96

Source: ONS annual survey of hours and earnings - resident analysis

Note: Median earnings in pounds for employees living in the area.

Table 1: Earnings by residence

Other relevant research

Members considered national research to reflect on local issues around why English language is important, employment support for groups with support needs, women and employment and integration and cohesion. These were considered where there was no specific local research available for debate when considering local service provision.

19. A recent report 'A common language – making English work for London'⁸ by DEMOS highlighted four key reasons why English is important:

- **Empowerment** – Speaking English plays an important part in helping people take control of their own lives
- **Economics and employability** – Enabling people to find employment and achieve progression into work
- **Integration and social cohesion** – Helps people to communicate and interact with one another in communities
- **Intergenerational social mobility** – Supports parents to contribute to their children's development and educational attainment.

20. Mark Grimley Joint Assistant Director of Organisational Development, presented GLA research which shows that those with mental health problems or who have a disability are more likely to be affected by employers who do not accommodate their needs. These groups also need intensive support to help address unemployment issues.

⁷PayCheck Data 2008

⁸'A common language – making English work for London', DEMOS, 2008

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21. Moving on up? The Way Forward⁹ is a statutory investigation under the Sex Discrimination Act 1975. The legislation gives the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) the power to undertake general formal investigations into deep-seated issues of gender inequality or discrimination, and to make recommendations to those in a position to make changes, including Government. The investigation recognises that positive messages about the potential contribution of Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Black Caribbean women can make in the workplace and to the economy as a whole is absent from public debate. There is also limited thinking about the links to cohesion and integration. In recognising local diversity and the large number of women who are excluded from the labour market, it is imperative that we recognise the level of support women need.
22. Our Shared Future¹⁰ – the report by the Commission on Integration and Cohesion launched in 2007, recognised that deprivation remains a key influencer of cohesion. Its recommendations recognised the role of schools and employers in strengthening cohesion. In essence, places of work are in a key position to promote cohesion and integration and employment is a way out of deprivation. The report also argues that strong community leadership is key. Both officers and elected Members have a leading role to play. It also recognises that language is a determinant of integration and integration is a determinant of cohesion.

Current local initiatives

Tackling Child Poverty Strategy

23. Throughout the review we considered the themes identified in the development of our local Tackling Child Poverty Strategy and the areas of work developing under each theme:

- Removing barriers to work – including supporting parents who are job-ready or close to job-readiness to find work, developing strategies to reduce systematic disincentives to work, providing high quality childcare options, and offering top-up skills and training. We are using the vehicle of the City Strategy pathfinder to offer flexible and discretionary assistance to provide innovative ways of support.
- Developing pathways to success – including investing in longer term training and development, for example around basic skills and English language needs, working with community organisations to create more accessible local and supported work or volunteering opportunities, and actively supporting parents with disabilities and poor mental health into sustainable work options.
- Breaking the cycle of poverty - including our continued and strong focus on education, personalised strategies to prevent young people from becoming NEETs, targeted intergenerational work with families with a history of worklessness, interventions to reduce youth offending, raising community aspirations and active parental engagement in young people's learning.

⁹ Moving on Up- the way forward, Equal Opportunities Commission, March 2007

¹⁰ Our Shared Future, Commission on Integration and Cohesion, 2007

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- Mitigating the effects of poverty - including opening up cultural, sporting and leisure opportunities to those who would not normally access them, maximising the take-up of benefits, improving access to health services and health promotion opportunities, developing localised extended services, and making the greatest use of our green spaces.
- 24.** Members welcomed and supported the areas identified in the Strategy which will provide families and young people the support needed to secure sustainable employment and move out of poverty. We were particularly keen to ensure our review added value to both the development of the Strategy and the subsequent Action Plan.

The Employment Strategy

- 25.** The Tower Hamlets Partnership has shaped how it will support parents into employment through the Employment Strategy. It sets out actions based on an analysis of equality and diversity and on the key issues around employment. The Employment Strategy states:

“There are 50,000 residents not working, 42,000 state they do not want to work, the majority of these being female.”

- 26.** The Working Group noted from the Employment Strategy that:

“Increasingly the issue is one of helping people who face a range of difficulties and constraints, not just relating to qualifications, skills and attitudes and motivation to work, but also to their household or family circumstances and to problems such as poor health and disability. ‘...’Existing labour market policies and programmes, while broadly successful in overall terms in reducing worklessness, have been less effective in helping particularly disadvantaged groups in deprived neighbourhoods”.

- 27.** Members commented that the use of data to argue that 42,000 women do not want to work undermines the barriers local women face and could perpetuate negative perceptions of women who can make a significant contribution to the economy. It also disproportionately impacts on the support women then receive in getting into employment. Members urge the Tower Hamlets Partnership to recognise that the issue of unemployed women is a specific problem for the borough. Members felt that the Employment Strategy could do more to recognise the barriers that women face in getting access to the labour market. National research illustrates powerfully that woman and mothers are additionally disadvantaged.
- 28.** For women from BME communities there are many hurdles to employment – lack of family role models, lack of language and other skills. Given that many of these women may move in a small area Members discussed how to improve opportunities in small local businesses particularly for middle aged women. A greater visible presence of women in the economy could have a positive impact on cohesion.

City Strategy Pathfinder

- 29.** Tower Hamlets is part of the City Strategy Pathfinder launched in May 2006. Its aim is to bring together key stakeholders across a 'City' area identified as having high levels of worklessness, contributing to the Government's target of 80% employment rate across the UK. In Tower Hamlets, access to support has been set up across community hubs, extended schools services and Children's Centres, ensuring coverage across the Local Area Partnership areas.

English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)

- 30.** The Working Group heard from Tower Hamlets College, Life Long Learning and the Learning and Skills Council about ESOL provision. Skills for life, including ESOL are a Government priority with targets attached to provision. For 08/09, literacy and ESOL provision has to be at Level 1 to meet targets and numeracy has to be at Entry Level 3 or above to meet the targets. In Tower Hamlets there is high demand for pre-entry and Entry Level 1 and 2, particularly Level 1 for new readers and writers. Local ESOL providers all report consistent high demand with many residents being turned away as the waiting list is already high. There is also strong demand for localised provision.
- 31.** Learning and Skills Council funding supports local ESOL provision as will the Working Neighbourhoods Fund. Members noted that there has been significant reduction in funding recently. Despite this, Members felt that more work could be done to lobby Government to recognise the demand for ESOL as a vital support for families to move out of poverty.

The London Child Poverty Pledge

- 32.** The London Child Poverty Pledge (details of the Pledge are attached at Appendix B) has been developed to strengthen the commitment of organisations to improve the impact of their services and practices on parental employment, child poverty and the outcomes for children living in poverty in London. The Pledge is an opportunity for Tower Hamlets Partnership to demonstrate its commitment to tackling child poverty.
- 33.** The Working Group heard from Mark Grimely Joint Assistant Director Organisational Development that the Council has adopted a number of policies to support those who have family and other care responsibilities. These include flexible working arrangements, flexi-time which is time off in lieu for hours worked over contracted hours and job-share is also available for those who wish to work part-time if the role is a full-time post. The Council also provides benefits around parental leave beyond the statutory parental leave.
- 34.** With a high number of female workers and part-time positions the Council is a good employer for those who would benefit from flexible working and is suitable for parents with children.

Jobcentre Plus

- 35.** Derek Harvey External Relations Manager from Jobcentre Plus explained that services are offered by two Jobcentre Plus offices in Poplar and Commercial Road. These include access to jobsearch support, job vacancies (via an adviser, internet, job points and telephone contact centres), training opportunities (via advisers and internet), advice and

guidance and financial incentives. Outreach workers are placed across the borough undertaking 'benefits better off calculations' for local residents, including working in five Children's Centres. There has also been some joint training and working with the Family Information Service and Skillsmatch.

36. Progress regarding people into work is measured via Job Outcome Target¹¹ which reinforces Jobcentre Plus' purpose of moving people from welfare to work with more focus on helping disadvantaged customers into employment. Last year, the figures for Tower Hamlets were as below:

Targets	Numbers supported
People started work	4914
Lone parents (452) people with health conditions or Disabilities (388) other inactive benefit customers(124)	964
JSA New Deals, People with disabilities & people unemployed over 6 months	1289
People unemployed less than 6 months	1749
Non-claimants	622
Employed customers	290

37. The discussion about Jobcentre Plus focused on the experiences of local residents of using its services; these are detailed on page 24.

Childcare provision

38. Helen Jenner, Service Head Early Years Children and Learning and Jo Green, Planning and Information Manager, presented information about childcare provision. The Council has an advisory and developmental role in supporting childcare provision. It has a duty to provide information on childcare to parents and carers. It also promotes the various funding schemes available. All registered childcare provision is subject to Ofsted registration and inspection. There is a range of childcare provision being offered to local residents in different settings. The occupancy rate can vary and most settings have some vacancies. Since 2001, there has been a considerable growth in the provision available in full daycare and out of school provision.
39. The cost of provision will also vary by setting and type. Maintained places are the most affordable for full daycare with the average weekly cost being £141, whilst the voluntary sector is on average £173 per week and private places about £229.

For child-minder settings, the average weekly cost in Tower Hamlets is £160 whilst the London average is £196 for under 2s. Playgroups cost are free for 3 and 4 year olds; for non-funded places they cost about £11 on average per week. Out of school provision can range from £6 per term for non-working families at Junior Youth Service provision and up to £50 a week in private and voluntary settings.

¹¹ A job outcome is captured when a job start is recorded by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HRMC) for a Jobcentre customer who has a benefit and/or Labour Market System record, i.e. when a former jobcentre customer starts paying tax having started work and benefit ceases.

40. Children's Services also proactively seeks sources of funding to support parents access childcare and to support settings to improve their quality and to ensure that disabled children can get access to settings. Members debated the local perceptions of the availability, quality and affordability of childcare and suggested that further work be developed to raise awareness of the range and cost of childcare support available. Member evidence is further explored on page 23.
41. The Council has a statutory duty to provide information to parents with children up to the age of 19. This is co-ordinated through the Family Information Service and information and services are accessed by residents through Extended Schools Services, a telephone helpline and local Children's Centres of which there are 21. The service also maintains and is developing a database for information that it provides to residents to ensure consistency and quality of information and advice.

Health, debt advice and employment

42. Although the review did not set out to consider health or financial exclusion, evidence and discussion in the Working Group often led to these areas and further evidence was sought. Some discussion did also arise during the One Tower Hamlets Interviews on health and debt.

Health

43. Mark Grimley, Joint Assistant Director Organisational Development, presented information on the current initiatives to support groups that may be deemed vulnerable. In partnership with the Primary Care Trust, the Council has developed a range of initiatives to address worklessness and health issues. Currently a Health and Employment Group is looking at families with health conditions and their access to employment. Jobcentre Plus is involved in this project. The primary aim of the project is to focus on Incapacity claimants and assist them into employment. There is also an initiative in place for those with English as second language which offers placements in jobs where they can grow into the job. For disabled people or people with mental health conditions, work with employers is underway to recognise the need to support this group. These are well received. However, given the depth of unemployment and barriers faced by local residents, the Working Group felt that this work needs to be further developed beyond projects that deliver a small number of people in employment. Members therefore suggest that on-going programmes are developed to support local residents.

Recommendation A

That the Tower Hamlets Partnership develop on-going programmes to support specific groups facing barriers to employment.

Sickness

44. Given the current work to support incapacity claimants, the Working Group felt this could be further extended to consider developing a referral mechanism from GPs to get people who are on sick leave back into work. It was felt that these residents would need intensive support and that careful consideration be given about how the individual, her/his GP and potential employer could work together.

45. The current requirement is that you are sick or you are well enough to work. This is a barrier to people who may otherwise be kept in work by having much more reduced hours. This can adversely affect those with mental health conditions. Members felt that one day a week at work for example can often break the cycle of no return to work. Doctors at the moment do not know how many sick certificates are being issued through their practice although a new recording system is being developed for monitoring sick notes and some GPs are referring people for support in some situations. The Working Group identified the need to look at intervention for people who are at risk of not working and providing tailored support to break the cycle of long term sickness. Furthermore, because there was no clear approach to this Members suggest that a review of the policy, procedures and monitoring systems in place should be undertaken to identify way of breaking the cycle of long term sickness.

Recommendation B

That the Health and Employment Group consider the role of GPs in identifying ways of breaking the cycle of long term sickness for those with support needs.

Financial exclusion and support for local people

46. Access to fair borrowing and security in ways of holding and storing money are basic financial needs. The Working Group heard from Maura Farrelly, Neighbourhood Manager about local issues related to financial exclusion and initiatives. These range from affordable credit, debt and money advice and promotion of debt and financial literacy offered through a number of third sector organisations.
47. An increasing number of households are also affected by problem debt. One-off household needs, such as the replacement of a fridge, can force financially excluded households to use high-cost credit, which can lead to over-indebtedness¹². Non-mainstream lenders, such as doorstep lenders and loan sharks, can charge inflated interest rates of between 309% and 1355% APR on loans¹³. Members heard about a local single parent interviewed who was buying ice cubes to keep her newborn child's milk cold because she could not afford a fridge/freezer. She was aware that this did not make financial sense long term but did not want to get into debt. She had used her access to social funds to purchase a cooker which enabled her to cook meals rather than depend on take-aways.
48. The Working Group debated the enormous barriers faced by people who are financially excluded. Everyday people in this situation have a very real fear of not having enough to survive. These vulnerable people are often low skilled, perhaps suffer from a lack of education, may have a learning difficulty, have poor English skills, or simply fear the reception they will receive. Evidence presented suggests that the demand for debt advice in Tower Hamlets has increased and currently outstrips supply. The funding available for debt advice from the Legal Services Commission has been reduced and this will continue to be the case.

¹² Debt on our Doorstep, Scaling up for Financial Inclusion, pp. 16

¹³ HM Treasury, Promoting Financial Inclusion, pp. 29-30

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49. In considering the evidence about the importance of debt advisors in the current economic climate, Members suggested that there is a need for intervention to stop families from falling into debt and in supporting those families where debt is already a problem. Given the nature of the work in Children's Services and their targeted work with local families, Members suggested that they are ideally placed to provide and promote debt and financial advice. They argued that in assessing residents' service needs debt management should be included and built into existing assessments including Common Assessment Framework and the Core Assessments. Members also argued that front-line staff are key to the experience of and access to services for residents. Equipping staff in Children's Centres to provide debt management and financial advice would assist people before there is a crisis and would meet the requirements of the Child Poverty Pledge.
50. Members further argued that given the Financial Services Authority (FSA) is based in the borough; there may be some willingness to work in partnership given the current economic climate. The FSA can play a role in developing local services around debt and financial advice. Children's Centres should explore how to secure financial support and staff time from the FSA.

Recommendation C

That Children's Services ensures that assessments, including Common Assessment Framework and Core Assessments include debt management considerations and whether financial advice is required as part of action planning.

Recommendation D

That Children's Services develop and train front line staff at Children's Centres to deliver debt management and financial advice in partnership with locally based organisations such as the Financial Services Authority and third sector organisations.

51. The External Funding Team in Development and Renewal co-ordinate the funding of voluntary sector debt advice and have a role in distributing and co-ordinating information and initiatives. Members debated the impact of local residents turning to non-mainstream lenders to address financial issues. They raised the importance of promoting awareness of financial inclusion and debt management for local residents and encourage wider promotion through East End Life and the publications of key partner agencies.

Recommendation E

That the External Funding Team in Development and Renewal consider how financial inclusion and debt management might be further promoted through wider publicity in East End Life and through the publications of key local agencies.

Key findings from the community leadership model

The model

- 52.** Members wanted to explore their community leadership role and discussed what the requirements might be of Councillors. This discussion took place in the broader context of the One Tower Hamlets aspiration and the specific inequalities of child poverty.
- 53.** Interviews were conducted with residents with low income levels from a range of backgrounds. They were contacted through local organisations or via Members themselves. Members also undertook focus groups, visits and received email submission from a local resident. It was important that as well as the wider data based evidence used to develop services, there was a need to ensure the areas identified for development reflected solutions that would work for residents from different backgrounds. To identify these, Members spoke to the following residents:

Household	Income per week
Single young Female NEET	£93 after rent and council tax
Bangladeshi graduate with two children and a husband who speaks English as second language	£214 after rent and council tax
White family of three adults and one child – intergenerational worklessness	£230 after rent and council tax
Bangladeshi Male with three school age children, both parents with English as second language	£165 after rent and council tax (estimated)
A disabled parent with three school age children receiving care package	£246 after rent and council tax
Young Male NEET living with family	Not available – did not disclose
Caribbean single mother with 1 child	Not available – did not disclose
Sikh couple with 2 disabled children	Not available – did not disclose

Table 2: One Tower Hamlets Interviews – residents interviewed

Women only focus group

Having recognised the high level of worklessness in the borough Members wanted to explore barriers and aspirations of women. A focus group involving 25- 30 local women from different backgrounds took place at the Lansbury Lodge. Crèche facilities were provided.

Single parents' focus group

Members wanted to better understand the barriers particular to single parents. A focus group took place with 4 local single parents. One parent who was unable to attend contributed via an email submission. Crèche facilities were provided. Reed in Partnership and Citizen Advice Bureau also attended to talk about the issues for residents they were supporting.

Both focus groups were promoted in the following ways:

- Article in East End Life and in the East London Advertiser

A flyer with details of the review and the focus group was sent out to the following organisations:

- Lansbury Lodge
- Schools cluster group - One Plus Working Group
- Bromley By Bow Centre
- Women's Link
- Job Centre Plus
- The Mobile Single Parents Project
- Individual contacts

A visit to Mile End Hospital was made to consider the development of the Family Nurse Partnership (FNP), a project supporting young parents and their child, initially developed in America and researched for over 30 years. Tower Hamlets is one of only 10 sites across England to have the opportunity to test the FNP model in the UK in partnership with the Local Authority. Members were keen to explore whether early intervention for young parents was working.

The Scrutiny Officer attended the Women for Change Conference hosted by The Asian Health Agency to speak to women and service providers about the particular issues for women. A number of Somali women attended this conference.

The following headings cover the main issues raised through the interviews, focus groups and the visits.

Desire to work and for learning and development

"I really want to get a job as my husband is struggling with his income which means my children are struggling."

"I don't want to be the kind of person who is on benefits all my life...I want to go to university to specialise in mid-wifery, I'm confident about this course and want to complete it."

54. Amongst the participants of the focus groups (women and single parents) there was a genuine desire to seek employment or training. Many talked about the high level of support they had received from local third sector organisations to develop the confidence needed to develop this desire. From the One Tower Hamlets Interviews, there appears to be mixed views about the benefits of and desire to work. Many spoke about their lack of confidence to enter or re-enter employment and the barriers they had experienced. Some felt that it did not make financial sense to pursue work, particularly where childcare costs were involved.

55. Following consideration of the Employment Strategy, Members argued that many local women were keen to gain employment and skills, however they face a range of barriers which are particular to individuals and that these need to be supported. Faced with barriers, many are likely to feel work would not pay unless supported. They urged the Tower Hamlets Partnership to re-consider its position on women and employment in the Employment Strategy.

56. Members heard from local residents about their concerns of not being able to access ESOL because of long waiting lists and the lack of childcare. Members debated that it can get harder to learn with age and that it should be recognised that the amount of literacy to get fluency levels can take time. Members argued for comprehensive ESOL with childcare if needed. It should not just be linked to 'ability to pay' as families in need of ESOL do decide that other financial needs come first, leaving many women permanently isolated. A planned pathway through ESOL to training and work experience would be useful for many women currently with no hope of making the transition alone. Members argued middle aged BME women are more likely to feel isolated and disengaged. Members urged the Council to explore an 'apprenticeship' package to employ a cohort of middle aged Bangladeshi women to mentor into work, with placements in as many areas as possible. Outcomes should be measured and documented so that lessons can be learnt from this.

Recommendation F

That Tower Hamlets Partnership re-consider its position and use of data to review the support needed to get women into employment with a particular focus on supporting Bengali women.

Support for access to employment

"I don't know how I'll get a job but I'll need help and support with it because I've been out of the job market for so long. I would need to get computer skills. I would have to build confidence because I've been out of the job market for so long. I'm surrounded by women who are like me, in my situation but I also have friends that have done really well in jobs so I know it can be done but it's different for me as I have children."

57. In both the interviews and focus groups the need for different kinds of support for those who have been in employment before and those who have never worked was raised. Local women spoke of the need for support from trusted local organisations to develop their confidence, skills and learning for employment. Not only were women keen to learn English and get into employment but the demand from those who want to learn English currently outstrips supply. Those in attendance at the Woman for Change Conference expressed concerns that having gained qualifications there was no guidance and support to progress further. These women found that they had no real access to employment and were unable to secure any support to gain it. Members were keen to establish why this was the case, particularly as there are many points of access to employment support and suggested that the referral process from completion of courses to employment support is explored.

Recommendation G

That the ESOL Providers Action Group explores ways to improve the referral process to employment advice and opportunities for students who have completed courses;

Advice and information

“I’ve been out of work for so long, it’s like I don’t know anything anymore, and I don’t even know where I’d get information from.”

58. Interviewees talked about their access route to and awareness of services. There were perceptions about the quality, availability and cost of childcare. Many people rely on word of mouth. In particular the Somali community expect to use services which others had used and had benefited from previously.
59. The quality of advice can vary across access points. In crisis, families need support on a range of issues to address poverty. In addition to debt advice they may require employment, training, housing and child welfare advice. Residents expressed a desire to see more co-located services where they are supported by someone they could trust on a range of issues. Services highlighted that offering debt advice on its own for example often did not attract many people. In settings where it was offered in conjunction with other activities, these worked better for local residents.
60. Member noted that residents were unsure of the availability of information and where they would go to obtain it. Key local agencies such as Children’s Centres and East End Life were mentioned as key access points for information. Mothers with young children talked about the use of GPs and how health professionals had supported them. In particular the Family Nurse Partnership which is an early intervention service for young first time parents was mentioned.

Childcare

“Day places seem to cost more – this will be a challenge when I go to university”

“What’s the point of me working to then pay someone to look after my child?”

61. Both the focus groups and the One Tower Hamlets Interviews suggest that whilst there is some general awareness of childcare provision, there is uncertainty about its affordability particularly whether it pays to work and meet the cost of childcare. A benefit/pay analysis including the cost of childcare would help residents to decide the long term impact of being employed. The biggest barrier for residents was the cost of childcare which is seen to be too expensive. There was evidence that there is limited awareness of the different childcare settings available. Members suggested that there is a need to raise awareness of the role and services provided by Children’s Centres and specifically about childcare options.

Recommendation H

That Children’s Services strengthen the promotion of the role of Children’s Centres and child care support through East End Life and the publications of other partner agencies.

English for Speakers of other Languages (ESOL)

“I signed up for ESOL but the wait is too long”

“I have a degree, I have computer skills but my English speaking is not good. I don't think employees will be comfortable with it.”

62. Public funding increasingly supports ESOL provision leading to qualifications which would encourage employment. The Learning Skills Council suggests that women are more likely to face financial barriers in accessing this. In households where the income threshold might mean that provision is not subsidised, women may not have the additional income to support themselves and may not be supported by their spouses. Members argued that with high levels of poverty and deprivation there is a need to focus on what works with supporting women into employment and providing adequate financial support is key.

Recommendation I

That Tower Hamlets Partnership should continue to support ESOL financially and identify targeted funding for women who may not meet the financial threshold for assistance and where they are not able to gain access to the household income.

63. Having considered the evidence about ESOL and listened to the experiences of local residents Members argued that without being able to access opportunities for learning English, residents remain at risk of not integrating and continuing without work. The combined lack of ESOL and work for BME women, particularly older women does have a wider impact on cohesion. The Working Group noted the additional funding levered in through the Working Neighbourhoods Funds and recognise the allocation to ESOL provision. However, given the high level of demand they would urge all those responsible for worklessness, equality and integration to continue to lobby government to recognise the high level of need and secure on-going high levels of funding.

Recommendation J

That the Cabinet in partnership with the Learning Skills Council lobby Government to increase funding for ESOL.

Jobcentre Plus

“I went to the Jobcentre Plus but they asked for a CV and courses but I didn't have them at the time.”

“They judge you, their experiences with other people means they treat you very rudely. They are not very helpful; I don't go to them because they are of no real help.”

64. The evidence from Members' interviews suggests that those who are particularly at risk of being in poverty are families where there are one or more vulnerability factor(s) such as English as second language, disability, and/or being a woman. The evidence particularly from the focus groups also suggests that these groups of people find it increasingly difficult to use the services of Jobcentre Plus. Many describe negative customer experience and case management. Many women would not feel confident and comfortable in approaching Jobcentre Plus in wanting to gain access to employment. These women would need support from someone who understood them and who they could trust. The nature of case management at Jobcentre Plus did not enable this.
65. There is a very real perception that Jobcentre staff seem to provide only an administrative role, and that this deters people from engaging with them. Evidence suggests a lack of empathy and respect, and, even from some, total disregard for the applicant's plight, with a focus on how the system works, not on what the applicant needs. Members felt that the complexity of applying for benefits is scary enough but for the onus to be on the applicant to know and understand what to do and when is unfair. Any complexity needs to be 'behind the counter' not in front of it. Staff should play an advocate role for the applicant, and help ease the process. Training staff to recognise and support local residents without skills would improve experiences for local residents and increase the chances of them seeking employment more positively.

Recommendation K

That Jobcentre Plus review customer experience and case management with a view to improving the experiences of local people.

66. Members also discussed how important it is for people on benefits to protect their means to survival. An average wait for benefit or a benefit change of even only one month means people become in debt. If they have children they are heavily in debt. Financial exclusion can mean entering debt to manage. When someone gets their benefits or low wages, it is already spent. You then survive on the cheapest food. It is hard to be optimistic and proactive when this is a daily experience. No food can be held, no stocks built up as there is no spare money to build a larder of staples. Food has to be bought and eaten day to day. Then it often means a reliance on fast food, as there are problems paying the gas charges - or you can't afford the gas at all, or you don't have a cooker, or maybe not even a fridge. It is impossible to 'put things by', plan meals in advance, you have no back up. A missed benefit payment means being literally destitute. This has enormous implications on health, both in resulting possible ill health and obesity, and also stress and depression. The impact of this on the wellbeing of children is enormous.
67. From a number of residents Members heard about their experiences of moving in and out of jobs and benefits and the negative impact this can have on families and children. It is for this reason Members stressed how vitally important it is for our residents that the benefits system be revised to make timely payment the top priority for initial and ongoing claims to ensure people wait as little time as possible for payment. The consequences of delayed payments can mean going without meals or going into debt.

68. Members argued that when people can rely on support when they need it, they can then be persuaded to try to change other things. Without the assurance and trust that the Jobcentre will pay them on time, people will not trust the system, and will resist being moved back to work as they will expect it to go wrong, and thus make their situation worse. This was a very common theme emerging from the evidence Members gathered.

Recommendation L

That the Cabinet lobby Department of Work and Pensions to review how the benefits payment system can be improved to make prompt payments and support people so as not to fall further into poverty.

Somali community

69. When Members met with Somali residents one of the issues raised was the difficulty of engagement. It emerged that face to face contact was important. Residents talked about how any negative experiences of using Council services ultimately discouraged others from using it. In the same way, where services have worked, it influences how people view services. Members therefore argued that it would be useful to recruit a Somali outreach worker to engage and support this community into employment. They suggested that this would be particularly relevant in engaging Somali women.

Recommendation M

That the Partnership explores ways to improve employment opportunities for the Somali community including the use of outreach work.

Flexible employment opportunities

70. Residents often spoke about the lack of jobs generally, and the lack of flexible jobs more specifically. Employment within schools settings was popular because it gave parents the time to spend school holidays with their children. They had seen a friend or a neighbour secure employment and they were happy with their job in that setting. Flexibility of jobs was more important to parents and those supporting extended family members who might have children. Having considered the Child Poverty Pledge, its requirements and our position against the requirements, Members felt that the Council should sign-up to the Pledge and further argued that it would be a demonstrable way of making a commitment to addressing child poverty. They discussed major local employers in the area and the potential for job opportunities from the Olympics. They argued that the Pledge should be used to influence the Primary Care Trust (PCT), Canary Wharf and the Olympics Authority to recognise the employment needs of local residents and increase the availability of flexible working.

71. The National Health Service (NHS) and the Council is a large local employer, with a combined workforce of about 25,000. The PCT has a local commissioning budget for health valued at £2.5 million and opportunities could be used to promote initiatives to embed the Pledge and address local people's employment needs. The positive relationship between the Council and the PCT means that the Council can proactively use the commissioning process to reflect the Child Poverty Pledge requirements, Members felt strongly that the commissioning process be used to benefit local people in this way.

Recommendation N

That the Council should sign-up to the London Child Poverty Pledge and encourage partners including the PCT, Canary Wharf and Olympics Authority to sign and use the Pledge to respond to the employment needs of local people.

Engaging new communities

72. The Working Group recognises that Tower Hamlets has a history of receiving and welcoming new communities. Members raised concerns that new communities who may not be aware of and may find it harder to use services around the decision making process such as accessing Councillors. In the One Tower Hamlets Interviews Members had spoken to residents about Overview and Scrutiny and the role of Members, in the analysis of the interviews, Members recognised that newer communities in particular may be unaware of how local democracy works and how to gain access to Members and felt that further work was needed to ensure that newer communities were informed about the role of Members preferably at the point of entry into Tower Hamlets.

Recommendation O

That the Council explore ways of increasing the participation of new communities in the democratic process.

Engaging local media

73. There was some debate about local people's understanding of politics, decision making and Scrutiny. Members discussed the potential for the media to be used to explore these issues with local people. They felt that BME women in particular are likely to be isolated and that work with local media to inform and debate on local issues would engage them and could also encourage more informed. Members were particularly keen that local media, in particular the BME media be used to debate local issues impacting on the community and that the media is used to champion positive stories. The local issues affecting the borough around employment for example with positive stories of men and women who succeed in initiatives to gain employment would establish a sense of what the possibilities are for local people.

Recommendation P

That local BME media is used to increase awareness of how local democracy works and how it can address local issues for example unemployment and to champion positive stories about parental employment.

Homeless Services – temporary accommodation

“I don’t want to work at the moment as the rent in the temporary accommodation is really high and if I work my income will go on the rent.”

74. Members spoke to a number of local residents who were living in temporary accommodation. Their life experiences were often bound by housing and the move from one type of accommodation to another. Rent levels in temporary accommodation are generally high and are a disincentive for seeking work. The unplanned moves were also barriers to completing courses and training, particularly where the move is out of borough. Members discussed the possibility of providing financial assistance to residents in temporary accommodation as an incentive to work and were pleased to see this need reflected in the Tackling Child Poverty Strategy.

Working with young people and parents

Leah is 12 years old and wants to be a model. She doesn’t know what her mum wants her to be. (Extract from an interview with an intergenerational workless family.)

75. Young people spoke about how parental or sibling involvement impacts on their own achievements and aspirations. In one interview, a young 12 year old had never had a discussion with her parents about her aspirations. When discussions arose during the interview, the parents had no real desire to prompt their daughter to set goals and aspire to achieve academically or through a profession. Members discussed the excellent focus of the Tackling Child Poverty Strategy on developing young people and engaging parents in the child’s development.

Strengthening community leadership

76. The development of the role of community leaders was first discussed in the Local Government White Paper, *Creating Strong, Safe and Prosperous Communities*¹⁴, and subsequently introduced through the enactment of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007. It focused on placing local authorities at the heart of leadership in defining and shaping places. It recognised that Councillors, supported by their power to promote the wellbeing of their area (created by the Local Government Act 2000), have a key role to play in their leadership capacity in place shaping.

77. The current Government White Paper, *Communities in control: real people, real power*¹⁵, intends to pass power on to local communities and local citizens to control decision making. The paper recognises the role of elected representatives in the democratic process and the role of active citizens. The paper sets out a range of measures to hand power to local citizens and places duties on Councils to promote democracy, involve people in developing and commissioning services and it also challenges Overview and Scrutiny to raise its profile and improve accountability through involving and empowering local residents.

¹⁴ *Creating Strong, Safe and Prosperous Communities*, Statutory Guidance: Draft for Consultation, Communities and Local Government, 2007

¹⁵ *Communities in Control: real people, real power*, Communities and Local Government, 2008

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- 78.** The idea of ‘One Tower Hamlets’ as a place where everyone can reach their full potential is a key overarching theme in the Community Plan. Members have used this review to look at how community leadership might address some of the inequalities of child poverty and contribute to creating One Tower Hamlets. Once Members had considered a range of evidence on child poverty, they reflected on the use of One Tower Hamlets Interviews as a model for community leadership.
- 79.** The Working Group recognised that leadership can come from a range of sources. In considering what community leadership involves, the Working Group looked at information from the Improvement and Development Agency for Local Government (IDeA) Members prioritised stimulating local organisations and individuals to take up opportunities to express their views and speaking up for and on behalf of residents as priorities for community leadership.
- 80.** Officers in attendance saw working with other community leaders in the voluntary, community and business sector and offering vision and direction to local groups and building support for that vision as key role for Members in exercising their community leadership role. The recognition that leadership can come from a range of sources prompted Member discussion about what leadership might look like in Tower Hamlets.

Evaluation of the community leadership model

- 81.** The One Tower Hamlets Interviews enabled Members to develop an insight into the day to day lives of residents in Tower Hamlets. The interviews took place in a venue of the residents choosing, often in their own homes. The interview summaries are attached to this report. (See Appendix A) These illustrate the depth and range of areas covered and consequently identified the barriers experienced by local people. The aim of this research was not to bring pure qualitative research into Scrutiny; rather they enabled Members to consider the experiences of a range of people who collectively might represent the diversity of the borough.
- 82.** The One Tower Hamlets Interview format was discussed to identify how useful it was in understanding the Child Poverty agenda in the context of the diversity of the resident and its relevance in informing service developments. Members made the following comments:

“How else can you obtain this level of information? It can be useful in informing policy. He would not have engaged in other ways as he can’t read or write. Councillors do visits but never to bring information back other than the problems for the residents so this approach to the whole issue was interesting and using this as part of evidence for scrutiny is a really useful way to reflect residents’ issues.”

“She saw the importance and hoped that it would make a difference, she opened up in a way she wouldn’t have done in other contexts. Yes, it was definitely useful and engaging in the democratic process. It wasn’t driven by a process so I was free to listen to the whole story, it’s the best way because it’s not just about ticking boxes, you can ask the why, not just the what.”

“It was really interesting to hear what people’s experiences are and to getting a sense of the impact on individuals, it was particularly good to get different cultural perspectives. Absolutely useful for getting lots of insight”

“It’s really interesting ... of this being used as a way of representing the community, but needs to be backed up by solid evidence, It’s really interesting how much people will open up to you.”

“Yes, it was useful, definitely. We were speaking to a family who literally do not engage.”

“It was useful but we also need to think about newer communities and how they engage in the decision making process”

83. In evaluating this format or model for bringing evidence into scrutiny reviews, other areas for development of the model were identified, including how to undertake objective research and ask powerful questions.
84. The comments made by Members highlights the usefulness of engaging hard to reach communities through this model. In the evaluation, Members looked at each interview to identify key areas for improvement and therefore were able to link the interviews (what residents said) with policy development. The Working Group felt that more could be done to segment and understand communities in this way when developing strategies and services and suggest that this model is adopted in future work were Member community leadership in bringing forth evidence would be useful in developing services.
85. It was also clear from the One Tower Hamlets Interviews and the focus groups that working with partners was key to maximising the impact of work on child poverty on children. Residents did not want to be bound by organisational boundaries and discussions questioned what community leadership might look like in Tower Hamlets, Members suggested a Scrutiny review on community leadership in Tower Hamlets.

Recommendation Q

That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee undertake a Scrutiny Review exploring how the development of community leadership across the partnership could be improved and further explore how the One Tower Hamlets Interview model can be used to support this.

86. The Scrutiny Lead for One Tower Hamlets, the Chair of this review used the THIS Borough¹⁶ system to retrieve data to get a sense of local issues in Tower Hamlets. Members were keen to develop up to date, accessible statistical information on issues in their local ward as well as the more general information on the borough. The THIS borough was not easily accessible for this purpose. This information they felt would help in developing informed initiatives and strengthen their case for developing services and therefore strengthen their community leadership role. National research which has relevance and implications for Tower Hamlets would enable them to keep abreast of issues. The Chair felt that there was a need to rethink what information was available for Members and in what format to make it more accessible. The Working Group suggests clear data sets with data interpretation being made available to Members.

Recommendation R
That the Strategy and Performance Team further develop the THIS Borough system to improve support to Members.

Concluding remarks

87. In conclusion, the Working Group has made a number of recommendations which it feels will address some of the barriers to employment and add value to the lives of local families and children. Looking forward, some of the recommendations should help to strengthen community leadership not just of Members but also our wider partnership.
88. The Working Group recognise the excellence of the work developed in achieving Beacon Status on tackling child poverty and see the award as a positive message about the contribution that the Council makes in addressing the issues affecting the borough and also recognise that despite the depth of the issues, there are in place provisions which will attempt to see the cycle of poverty reversed. The Working Group also recognises that despite the developments, the Council and its partners can not be complacent and must continue to challenge and question what more can be done for local residents in addressing inequalities brought on by poverty.
89. The One Tower Hamlets Interview model has been useful in gathering insight as a way of linking into residents' experiences and was a useful way to develop the knowledge and understanding of local issues beyond case-work. More importantly, the evidence has enabled the identification of areas of improvement lead by residents' views.
90. In examining child poverty this review has focused on residents experience at Jobcentre Plus, support and access to employment and the Employment Strategy, ESOL provision, the London Child Poverty Pledge and childcare provision and has made recommendations having considered these and the evidence collected through the community leadership model.

¹⁶ The Tower Hamlets Local Information System, set up to provide easy access to a wide range of data about Tower Hamlets and its local communities, available on-line for Members, staff and residents.

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- 91.** In reflecting on the review, one of the issues which could have been investigated is the crippling costs of utility bills for vulnerable households. We need to investigate the impact of services and its costs to find ways of mitigating the negative impact on the poorest for the basic utilities. The high costs for vulnerable people can impact on health and obesity.
- 92.** The Tackling Child Poverty Strategy brings with it an opportunity to influence and shape the direction of the work needed to address the child poverty issue. The wealth of knowledge brought to this review through the Community leadership model has been used to inform the recommendations and as such this is an opportunity for the Strategy to reflect actions based on the experiences and voices of local residents and the Working Group look forward to these being reflected in the final strategy.

Scrutiny and Equalities in Tower Hamlets

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Appendix A

One Tower Hamlets Interviews Evidence for Child Poverty Scrutiny Review

Background

The interviews were conducted at a venue convenient for the local resident. Almost all the interviews with the exception of the interviews with the two NEET young people took part in the homes of local residents. The young people chose to come to the Town Hall. The interviews were conducted by Councillors from the Working Group and were supported by officers. The role of the Councillor was to lead the interview and ask questions. The role of the officer was to note the interview contents.

The beginning of all interviews involved a discussion about the role of Councillors in Scrutiny and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

All interviews were conducted with a set of questions to guide the discussion. Members were keen not to have multiple choice questions and felt that open ended questions would work best. A set of questions were framed to capture the story of the local resident – how they came to where they are and their personal aspirations. Questions also captured their experiences in getting access to support for employment or learning and skills through local agencies, what they thought their barriers and challenges are and how the Council and its partners can support them to address their barriers. To aide the discussion, Members asked supplementary questions to increase their understanding of the issue.

Please note the names of all participants have been changed.

Interview 1

Shirin Chowdhury is a local young graduate. She is a mother of 29 with a 7 year old daughter and a boy aged 3 years, all of Bangladeshi origin. Shirin lives with her husband and 2 children in temporary accommodation and has been unemployed since she left the Tower Hamlets Graduate Scheme after becoming pregnant and not having the option to return. Her husband has low levels of English language skills.

The rent is currently £350 per week, and along with council tax is covered by Housing Benefits. Shirin and her husband receive the following benefits:

Child Tax Credit: £370 per month

Jobseekers Allowance: £380 per month

Child Benefit: £105 per month

Total: £855 per month

Interview

Shirin's husband studied up to GCSE level in his homeland and attended ESOL Level 1 classes. Shirin and her husband are both unemployed.

She came to London at the age of 2 from Bangladesh and attended a local primary school. She feels she was well received there and the school roll had a mix of students from different backgrounds. Shirin has good memories of her days at primary school.

Shirin went into a local school where she completed secondary education and A Levels followed on by a degree at a local university. Shirin says she was grateful that she was the last group of students who were given grants for attending university which totalled about £3,000 per annum. The students who came in after her needed to take out loans to support their studies. Shirin was the first in her family to go to university; her siblings have not followed her ambitions and are all in unhappy circumstances, particularly her brothers. Her sister Shuma did not attend university because of the costs; she did however go on to work for a dental surgeon.

After graduation Shirin used Skillsmatch to get a graduate placement with New Deal for Communities. She then moved to Tower Hamlets Council to take a place on their graduate training scheme. This helped Shirin to access a Masters qualification. Shirin found out about the graduate scheme through East End Life the local newspaper. She also received help from Tower Hamlets College with interview skills.

Shirin got married and towards the end of the qualification period for her Masters, her daughter was born. This was a turning point. The graduate placement did not give her the option of returning and she did not receive any maternity pay. "I had no choice but to leave, although I could have deferred my Masters but it would be at my own expense and with a baby and no option to return to work, I couldn't see a way out – I had no option really." Shirin was unable to work. Thereafter her husband fell ill and was unable to do any jobs of a manual nature. He has no other skills he can use; recently he has started looking for jobs in the electrical trade and has experience of doing this in his homeland. He is very keen to develop his skills in this.

At the time her child was born Shirin was living at her parents home and tensions began to form. They went to Homeless Services as they couldn't afford to move into private renting and they were concerned that they did not want to bring up a baby in unsettling housing situation. At Homeless Services, Shirin was asked to show she could live with her parents for another month then return to Homeless Services, after which she was offered the Rent Deposit Scheme. She was eventually placed in temporary accommodation, Shirin was told she would be waiting 2/3 years and she has been living in temporary accommodation for over 5 years. "I was put in Green Street, I had no choice. I felt really isolated and depressed and it was affecting my relationship. The flat was really small and I didn't know where anything was, I didn't know where the local schools and hospitals were."

"I am living in poverty. I'm just about scraping by. It affects everyone, I'm having problems with my relationship and I feel down all the time. I can't get things for my children. Emotionally, it feels very draining. It wasn't so bad when I had 1 child but now it feels more and more like I'm living in poverty, we're just about getting by." Shirin could feel the marked difference in being employed and being unemployed with a child. "If I wasn't pregnant I would have carried on working. I would have liked to go back but I feel like it was my problem and I had to deal with it – I also felt like I had no choice, no support – for some reason I didn't expect any support. I wasn't really given any options to return, people around me were really nice, but being nice didn't give me any options about work and managing family. I didn't even get maternity leave." "I want to go back to work or training because I've been out of work for so long. It would get me out of poverty. My husband's skills are very low because he doesn't have the skills needed for local jobs, at least if I had a job the family income would be more stable from what it is now. My husband has lost his motivation, he has tried and failed, he was on a course to learn English and

then we moved to the temporary accommodation in Green Street and the course was dropped.”

In the next 3/5 years Shirin would like to see herself in a job which would pay enough to take care of the family in a comfortable way. Being in temporary accommodation means that the rent is very high and they are not motivated to get a job as most of the income will be spent on the rent. Having to be prepared to move means they do not feel motivated to make any plans for their life. One move to Green Street was enough to unsettle everyone. “I’ve been out of work for so long, it’s like I don’t know anything anymore, I don’t even know where I’d get information from.”

“I don’t know how I’ll get a job but I’ll need help and support with it because I’ve been out of the job market for so long. I would need to get computer skills. I would have to build confidence because I’ve been out of the job market for so long. I’m surrounded by women who are like me, in my situation but I also have friends that have done really well in jobs so I know it can be done but it’s different for me as I have children.”

By asking Shirin on childcare and information, Shirin says the following:

“I have used Sure Start for childcare so if I needed childcare support I could go to them.”

“If I need information I could go to Job Centre Plus, Skillsmatch and look in East End Life to get information about the support I might need.”

Shirin feels that while she was young and single, the barriers she faced seem insignificant to the barriers in her life now. In her employment after graduation the barriers were about the whether she could get on with her colleagues who might have a very different lifestyle from her Muslim lifestyle. The barriers are now focused on managing children in a household with an income which is not dependable and being pregnant.

“It’s all a problem, I have the challenge of looking after the children, I don’t want to work at the moment as the rent in the temporary accommodation is really high and if I work my income will go on the rent. I will be in the same financial situation. It’s really frustrating. My husband’s ill health means he can’t hold onto jobs for too long even if he is lucky enough to get something like restaurant work, so his income is very unstable. I’m also pregnant and as I haven’t been getting maternity leave and pay the last time I can’t see the point of it.”

Shirin’s husband Tareq would like to get a job and has approached Job Centre Plus.

Tareq’s English is very limited and although he would like to improve his skills he is unable to do so, Shirin thinks this is because the family are constantly thinking about making the day to day needs of the family be met, they are constantly worried about this.

“He has used JCP but they were unable to help, there is a language problem. They put him on these computer courses and he says they are not good for him, he doesn’t understand the teachers as they speak English. He used a service in Poplar where staff speak Sylheti and can help him with job search.”

Shirin is concerned about her husband’s experiences of using Job Centre Plus, especially as he has a language issue. She feels that their attitude is that they assume you don’t want to work. She feels that on the job training to develop skills would be the ideal opportunity for her husband. She describes how Tareq attends computer training skills through the JCP. He attends the courses but isn’t benefiting because he does not understand English and the course is run in English. The other problem is the training is only for the main claimant of Job Seekers Allowance so there is nothing they are able to offer her. She was not directed to other course/training providers either. She feels that if benefits entitlements were linked to taking up appropriate training people would progress.

“We need skills based training and my husband wants to do electronics but they aren’t able to help him with this because they say he hasn’t got the qualifications to do the job.”

Shirin defined her key issues as:

- **Accommodation – the rent is too high for her to think about going to work as most of the income she receives will go towards the rent. This is her biggest barrier;**
- **Childcare arrangements - Shirin has informal childcare arrangements in place with her family supporting her if she needed help, however her mother’s health is deteriorating. She believes financially, it will not pay to work and have to pay childcare, so it wouldn’t benefit the family and the stress would not be ‘worth it’;**
- **Training and skills – She feels like she has lost touch with what the work place is like and what skills she would need. She feels she would need to have introductory training to introduce her to what the world of work is like and give her a chance to test the skills she has before being put into a job;**
- **A lack of information on what’s really available and where she can go to get information;**
- **Lack of opportunities where the training takes place on the job so that Shirin or her husband can develop themselves into a role;**
- **JCP training provision has been bad experience, the funding should be more focused on the needs of the individuals, Tareq could be support to learn English;**
- **If benefits entitlements were linked to developing language skills, then literacy and numeracy skills would improve in people.**

Interview 2

Susan Smith, a mother of 55, her son Tim (33) and daughter Leah (12) and husband John (51), all of Irish background have lived in their current 4 bedroom housing association property for a number of years. She also has 5 children from her previous marriage. Her children and her husband have low levels of literacy and numeracy. The Smith family are currently all unemployed. The family members do not currently hold any qualifications although attempts have been made to attend college.

Rent and council tax for the family is covered by Housing Benefits and the family contribute £25 per week towards rent. Parking permit requires £10 every week.

The income is as follows:

Susan

- 1. Income support - £500 per month**
- 2. Disability Living Allowance =£136 per month**

3. Child Benefit - £72 per month

4. Child Tax credits - £192 per month

Tim

1. Incapacity Benefits - £160 per month

(Pre-Christmas Tim received £240, this was reduced because he could not attend an interview to reassess his claim)

Total: £1060 per month

Without taking Tim's income into consideration, the total income per month is £900. The total outgoings on rent and parking totals £140 per month leaving the family with £760 or £920 with Tim's Incapacity benefit.

Interview

The family have lived in Tower Hamlets since Susan's mother arrived from Ireland and settled here. They live in a 4 bedroom ground floor property with a garden managed by a housing association; they do not wish to move from the property. Susan has been married to John for 16 years and Leah is their child. She has five children from her previous marriage and Tim is one of the children living with her, the others have married and moved out.

Susan is very interested in electronics. When she was able to work she undertook a range of jobs which are no longer available. She worked as a flat machinist and in a pickle making factory and button counting factory. She also worked in a shop. She constantly changed jobs because she did not want to be skilled at one thing. The year 1990 may have been her last job which was gardening for an older person in Thurrock. This ended when the person had a fall.

John is dyslexic but is also a qualified jeweller by trade. He has depression after a local incident took place – they were not able to provide details of the incident. Susan says he is willing to take work but gets tired of looking and not finding anything. He has problems with his hernia and so everything is a struggle for him. Susan feels he is stressed.

Tim went to the local school for children with special needs. He trained as an actor but is unable to get any work. He does filming with his friends and also on a voluntary basis to build up his CV. Tim went on to a Youth Training Scheme and couldn't find a job. He then worked in a warehouse where he developed back problems and went off to work as a Bar Manager where the owner was a gay local person. He also split up with his fiancé at the time.

"Things have been all bad since then, and I haven't been able to work for seven years and moved back in here"

Tim started a 6 months carpentry course then the college closed down and he was unable to complete his course. He would use Jobcentre Plus (JP) to look for jobs but also uses agencies for acting career. He attends JP every fortnight. He does find jobs he can do but they are usually gone by the time he gets around to calling them. Tim says despite his back problem he is offered jobs in the warehouse. He is trying to get a job in retail. After

some discussion, Tim recognises that he would need a part-time job to manage financially if he is to pursue a career in the acting profession.

Tim says he does use agencies to find jobs but feels this is difficult with competition from migrant workers. The problem with finding jobs through agencies is that some of these only offer short term work with some as short as 2 or 3 days work. With the need to inform of any changes of earnings to the benefits agency which means an immediate stop to benefits, this can get really complicated and stressful.

“It’s annoying because you have to let the Social (benefits agency) know about changes and it messes things up”

Tim is angry that the government says he has to live on very little money. Tim gives an example of when he was required to attend an interview but didn’t attend and his benefits were reduced. He is currently on medication for slipped disc and is always in and out of hospital which restricts him from taking up long term employment. Tim finds himself in a vicious cycle where benefits agencies would refer him to hospital where they would assess him as being healthy and he would be referred back to the benefits agency only to be told that he needs to be assessed again.

“The hospital always says I’m fine and send me to the social, the social keep sending me to the hospital”

Susan says she has been housebound for 17 years and needs someone to accompany her when she goes out. She feels the situation is getting worse.

After she stopped working in early 1990s, Susan went on to college to undertake a course. ‘People were pushing me to do something so I went to college and then my health got worse.’

Tim has concerns about being mugged. He feels like he has experienced racism living in Tower Hamlets although the Police say it’s not racism. When Susan spoke to the young boys who were causing concern, they stopped making as much noise as they used to. Susan would like to move out into the countryside, although she says she would need to buy the current home as the children would want to continue to live there. Susan feels the area has lost its hustle and bustle although noise from the shops/off licenses does irritate her.

For the immediate future, Susan is focusing on her electronics. Tim has brought her some broken fruit machines and she is working on these. Tim is focused on his acting career.

The family feel there is nothing they can do to change their circumstances.

“We can’t do anything to change our income; we don’t have holidays or pensions. We don’t do anything. Life is boring; we can’t save up to go on holiday.”

Susan is in debt and will willingly borrow money to get her children what they want. She divides up the weekly benefits for different purposes. She has a bank account and had 2 direct debits set up until she had to cancel one because of a fee she had to pay for a wildlife programme Leah likes. Tim feels more money through benefits would help the situation.

Whilst the interview takes place, Susan receives a number of telephone calls. She does not take any with the exception of 1 call where she arranges to pay off £100 the coming Monday to clear some of her existing debt.

Susan says she manages her debt. She would prioritise getting food into the house over household items. The food they bring into the house would either be tinned food or frozen food to make sure nothing is wasted and they are not too keen on meat products.

She does not feel like she or the family are in poverty. She has seen what poverty does to people and she feels she is lucky. She wishes other people were as comfortable.

Tim says he is likely to be living in a cardboard box if it wasn't for his mum. The family have internet access and a PC and 2 laptops as these are their access to the outside world. The internet access is in Tim's name as his older brother left with unpaid bills which blocked access for Susan.

Barriers to employment for Tim are his health and his disability. He also feels he is lacking in skills he might gain through training. Susan thinks Tim's numeracy skills are okay but not his literacy skills. Tim hasn't completed his basic literacy and numeracy skills course. The biggest barrier for Tim is not getting the support he needs to find and secure a job.

"When I ring them to ask for IT jobs, once they hear I'm dyslexic, they say oh it's not for you mate, I don't think you can do it. How do you think that makes me feel, I'm a human being too."

Susan uses the internet to find information. To get into the world of work she would need to build up her confidence and she would like help with that. The confidence would enable her to find jobs. She is concerned about what this support would be and what format it would be. She describes an incident with a locum doctor who she feels did not fully recognise her condition and passed her leaflets to read up on depression and anxiety. She found this to be very unhelpful as she has already used the internet to find out about these things. Susan likes her regular doctor and is able to go to the doctor for information.

Tim takes his sister to school and often finds people think he is the father. He does not have any money to be able to take her out and go to places with her.

Leah is 12 years old and wants to be a model. She did think about becoming a Vet but is now against this as it would mean putting animals down. She doesn't know what her mum wants her to be. She asks Susan what she would like Leah to be and Susan says she can be anything she wants to be as long as she is happy. There are no plans or encouragement for Leah to pursue a path and academic achievement is not pushed. Leah is currently being assessed for special needs as she has very low levels of concentration. Susan has concerns that local people are employed at the local schools. She isn't confident that they know what they are doing.

Some of the issues for the family as recognised by the Councillor:

- **A lack of parental engagement and guidance for young person to develop into professional/work roles or to pursue academic development;**
- **Support to find and maintain a suitable job for Ian who is on Incapacity Benefit;**
- **Tailored support to get Susan to develop her confidence and support with job search.**

Interview 3

Abdul is a 36 year old Bengali male living on the 7th floor of a tower block in Tower Hamlets. He holds no formal qualifications obtained either in the UK or from Bangladesh. He has 3 children aged 7, 6 and 2. The mother of the children is full time at home. He is currently unemployed; his previous experience has been in the restaurant trade. Since becoming redundant he has been unable to find another job, subsequently seeking Job Seekers Allowance and Child Tax Credit.

The rent and council tax for their property is covered by Housing Benefits. The family receive the following benefits:

Job Seekers Allowance: £160

Child Tax Credits/benefits: £500

Abdul has been in the UK for about 15-16 years and his wife joined him later and has been in the UK for about 10 years. Abdul says he can read but is not able to write which can be difficult but he can manage interaction with key organisations. He doesn't need interpretation services.

Abdul speaks limited English which he believes restricts him from other employment opportunities. He currently does not have any form of qualifications and acknowledges enrolling on an English course would help him progress. However, he is not confident about being able to successfully complete a course and also has doubts about whether it would help him to progress into decent jobs with decent income.

Abdul explained that the possibility of losing benefits entitlement discourages him and other people from seeking employment elsewhere. The restaurant trade is low pay and therefore he would still get some benefits to help him manage. He feels that the families' quality of life would not improve significantly, rather they would struggle to support their family on a very low income. Managing on benefits is less stressful than managing a job with low income and still having the same quality of life.

Abdul was unaware that persons who are on low wages could still be entitled to some benefits. He felt that if his right to claim benefits is not affected, he would consider applying for jobs other than in Indian restaurants but does not believe he has the skills to do other jobs. He does not believe he can work in Tesco for example because he does not have the language skills and his colleagues would give him a hard time. Abdul was concerned about changes to benefits that would affect him and his wife as his children get older. He feels the Council should lobby for any restrictions imposed on the current benefits entitlements.

Abdul also explained it would be convenient if he could work locally as it would enable him to balance work and family life effectively, particularly if he is required to attend to his family in an emergency. He gives an example of when his eldest daughter had an accident at home and needed medical assistance. As his wife does not speak English he had to commute from outer London to take his daughter to hospital.

The current economic down turn is affecting the Indian restaurant trade, where jobs are now harder to find. Therefore, Abdul feels he may have to undertake basic training to help him work within other hospitality and customer service companies. As it is difficult to find a job in local Indian restaurants he would like to work in companies such as Tesco if he could

have time to settle into the job and find a way of managing the income and if local jobs were available.

In terms of his experiences of receiving regular payments during his employment, Abdul has had no negative experiences. However, he is aware that often his counterparts do experience delays in payment when working in the restaurant trade.

If such a situation arises where there is no prospects for employment in Indian restaurants, Abdul feels he has no option but to look for jobs beyond his current remit, i.e. restaurants. He is not aware of where he would look to find jobs. He has always relied on finding work through friends and from information in local shops. These are circles where he says people understand his situation and will help him out.

Abdul feels his children are oblivious to their lack of privileges as they are still very young. Although he would like to change his circumstances and have a positive change, he feels the barriers are too difficult for him to overcome. He also feels there is a lack of encouragement from services such as the Council for people like him to take up challenges, although he was unable to say what these should be.

From his perspective, existing training offered by Job Centre Plus do not tailor their needs nor does it monitor whether people have understood the content of the course and how it will practically help improve career opportunities. This leaves him feeling hopeless and like he is wasting his time.

Abdul says that if his wife finds employment it will make the home management difficult and it would therefore not be possible for her to work. He also feels child care responsibilities inhibit this option. Abdul agrees accessible child care facilities should be available to help address this problem. He has concerns about who the children's carer would be. After some probing and a reluctance to discuss how his wife might progress, Abdul agrees that he may allow her to invest a few hours a day in work or training and that this would be manageable. The female Scrutiny Policy Officer attending the interview encouraged Abdul's wife to join in the discussion, she decided not to take part.

Abdul defines his key issues as follows:

- **A lack of skills to undertake jobs other than the restaurant trade;**
- **Language skills are a barrier to developing skills;**
- **A lack of confidence and belief that he would be able to develop and progress in areas outside of the restaurant trade;**
- **A lack of local jobs which are suitable for him**

Interview 4

Natalie is an 18 year old of White working class background who is Not in Education, Employment or Training and lives on her own in temporary accommodation.

The interview took place at the Council's New Start offices at Kit Kat Terrace, where Natalie has been a client for around eight months. Also present at the interview was Stella,

Natalie's personal adviser, as she felt more comfortable being interviewed with her there for support.

Natalie's rent and council tax is covered by benefits. She receives about £93 every fortnight.

Interview

Natalie lives alone on the Isle of Dogs in temporary accommodation provided through the Council's Homelessness Service. This is in a bed-sit that was allocated following the breakdown of Natalie's family due to violence. When she was made homeless, she was initially placed in a hostel in Kings Cross where she stated there was a lot of drug use. Natalie feels that her current housing situation is not good and that the Homelessness Service didn't treat her well due to her young age.

Natalie has been unemployed since leaving school. She spends the majority of her days looking for work, either via New Start or Connexions in Stratford. Natalie is interested in finding an admin-related job, or similar work based training, where she can work in an office environment with computers. She applied for the Hamlets Youth Trainee scheme and had an interview, despite not having the required grades at GCSE. She was unsuccessful and states she has heard that there is a very high rate of applications per job, around 1,000 applicants and only 24 positions available.

Despite being unemployed and in receipt of benefits, Natalie is determined that she will not give up looking for work. Living on benefits is not easy, and Natalie says that £93.00 for a fortnight is not enough once bills are paid. If she had more money, Natalie would use it to buy clothes and things to furnish and decorate her flat. She thinks that it is harder for her to find a job as she had no work experience at school. When asked, she says that she has thought about doing some voluntary work but wouldn't want to do this forever as ultimately she wants to be paid for working.

Natalie has nine GCSEs, including two at grades C and D. She admits that she was naughty at school and often used to play truant. She only liked certain subjects and found that her teachers were unsupportive, particularly in maths. Natalie praises the support that has been given to her by the staff from New Start, particularly from Stella whom she describes as 'like a second Mum'. They have not only given her help to find work but also supported her with housing problems, following a period when she was threatened with eviction due to rent arrears. In return, Natalie keeps appointments with New Start and always calls ahead if she will be running late.

In terms of family support, Natalie is still in touch with her brother, who lives nearby in West Ham, and sometimes has contact with her mother who now lives in Ireland. There is also some contact with her father, although this is limited as Natalie does not get along with his new wife. She has lots of friends around the borough and states that she makes friends easily as she's quite confident in social situations, although she also has a shy side.

Since going to New Start, Natalie has undertaken courses in personal development and completed a project in conjunction with News International. This involved preparing, filming and editing a DVD on New Start and interviewing previous participants. Prior to unemployment, Natalie was at college on a childcare course, but she found she had to drop out of this because of her housing situation and the associated stress.

Natalie states that her greatest achievement has been completing her GCSEs, which she did despite it being a very difficult time at home with the breakdown of her family. In terms of the barriers she faces, Natalie feels that her lack of work experience is the one thing that really holds her back. She also wishes that there were more training opportunities in the borough, or that these were more widely advertised. Ideally she would like to secure an administrative position either as an office junior or a receptionist.

Some of the key issues for Natalie as defined by the Councillor:

- **Natalie is a very positive and motivated individual;**
- **She has a lack of experience for CV purposes;**
- **She feels there is a lack of job opportunities;**
- **She would like to see wider advertising of the opportunities available, including jobs and training.**

Interview 5

Foyzul is a young 19 year old person who is Not in Education Employment or Training and is of Bangladeshi background.

The interview took place at the Council's New Start offices at Kit Cat Terrace, where Foyzul has been a client since he was 18. His cousin recommended the service to him and he has been coming ever since to see his personal adviser, Mozabel.

Interview

Foyzul lives with his family which consists of his parents, four sisters and one brother. In the past he has lived with an aunt outside of the borough as she has more space in her house. Foyzul is now back living in the borough and that was when he first started coming to New Start. In terms of his family, Foyzul's father and older sisters are all in employment, his mother is a housewife and his younger brother is at college studying accounting.

Despite currently being NEET, Foyzul has just signed up for two courses in IT and business administration which are due to start in March 2009. This will involve both studying and going on a practical office-based placement. He finished another IT course a month ago and then applied for a few retail jobs but was too late to secure a temporary position over the Christmas period.

After leaving school Foyzul went to college for a year to study business but dropped out after he got bored of the course and realised it wasn't really what he wanted to do. He then didn't do anything for a year before coming to New Start. This was helpful as one of the first things they did was put Foyzul on a short course which helped to identify his interests. Whilst Foyzul wasn't confident which direction he wanted to take beforehand, this course pointed him towards pursuing a career in IT.

Whilst at school, Foyzul undertook work experience at a Woolworths store and more recently Jobcentre Plus also helped arrange a work placement at Primark. However, Foyzul found retail to be boring as he felt like he was doing the same thing every day. He

finds the prospect of working in IT more interesting as there are so many different types of jobs and opportunities within the field and he also feels confident that he is good at it.

In terms of his social and family life, Foyzul has lots of friends, most of whom are in work rather than studying but some of whom he describes as 'not doing much'. When he and his friends get together they usually go out to eat and generally travel about the borough. Foyzul states that it's only gangs who are territorial and reluctant to go to new places. His parents wish that he would decide on a job or course and stick to in the long term, rather than changing his mind. Foyzul's sisters are all employed, one as a lawyer, and often help him out and encourage him in terms of looking for work and training.

Foyzul states that his teachers at school did talk about planning for the future in terms of jobs and universities, but it didn't feel important to him at the time and he didn't listen. Now he's older Foyzul says he realises that getting good qualifications is the key if he wants to secure a good job. He hasn't yet tried to get a job in IT as he doesn't have the qualifications so feels like he wouldn't have a chance at the moment. Although he aims to qualify in the next couple of years at the moment being out of work can make Foyzul feel down. He feels that sometimes people look at him differently once they know he isn't in work or training.

Foyzul admits that it took him a long time to decide what he wanted to do, but in hindsight he wishes that there had been more individual support at school about future careers and university. He feels that if young people were aware of how hard life can be when you don't have a job or qualifications then they might take a different course to him. Foyzul thinks the short course he took when he first came to New Start should be made available in schools.

In the future Foyzul would like to be rich, and he thinks good qualifications is the way to achieve his goal. For him the biggest barrier has been deciding what he wanted to do and which direction to take. Foyzul thinks his situation is ultimately his own fault and so there is no point feeling sorry for himself. Having the support of New Start is a definite help though. He thinks there are a lot of courses and training opportunities in the borough but doesn't know if the right people are finding out about them. Although people go to New Start, Connexions and Skillsmatch, Foyzul thinks that a main telephone number which gave young people advice on courses and jobs would be a good idea.

Some of the key issues for Foyzul as defined by the Councillor are:

- **He was unaware of how difficult life can be;**
- **He didn't realise early enough that he had to take responsibility for his life choices;**
- **He has had help to secure placement and is positive about this.**

Interview 6

Jaswinder and Baljit are a young Sikh couple with two children, one of whom is disabled.

The interview took place at the couple's home, where they live with their two sons, aged three and ten years old. Their eldest son, Kiran, was born with a rare syndrome which means he has a chromosome missing and is severely disabled.

Interview

The family have lived in their new-build Council property since November 2008, having been housed in temporary accommodation for almost ten years. Throughout this time the couple describe how they have been moved 'from pillar to post' having lived in five different properties over the period before being re-housed permanently. They are settling down in their new home but describe their housing experiences as very stressful.

Neither Jaswinder nor Baljit are in employment as the care of Kiran is a fulltime job in itself. He is known to get very distressed if either one of his parents are absent for even a short period of time. The family are supported by Jaswinder's mother who comes two or three times a week to help out with the children. However as Kiran gets older and is growing physically, the family are finding that he can be more physically aggressive and difficult to handle, particularly for Jaswinder's mother who is in her seventies.

Kiran attends a local school for children with disabilities, which Jaswinder says he loves as he requires a lot of entertaining. School gives him that stimulus. When he is at home and becomes bored he has a tendency to self harm. He also has problems sleeping, however he is not given medication for this as it is very difficult to get him to take treatment.

Baljit describes how he has a history of caring responsibilities, as he looked after his sister and her two young children before he was married and Kiran was born. He has never worked due to the difficulties of finding a job that pays well yet is flexible enough to fit in with his caring responsibilities. Baljit would like to find work to enable the family to have more money to enjoy life and also to get him out of the house.

Jaswinder explains that she was not allowed to work before she married and since having Kiran she has been unable to as caring has become her full time job. She says that the situation can be depressing; however she has recently started to take on some voluntary work at a community centre very close to the family home. Jaswinder is enthusiastic about the work she has been undertaking and says this has helped her make new friends and increase her confidence.

Both Baljit and Jaswinder say they would like to work but there are numerous barriers preventing them, not least the fact that they have few qualifications and feel that they may actually be less financially secure by working than they are on benefits. Baljit suffers from back and neck problems, which have been worsened by lifting Kiran as he gets older, whilst Jaswinder is diabetic. Jaswinder explains how she encouraged Baljit to apply for a plumbers training course, only to be told that he needed £5,000 upfront to undertake the training. Baljit states that there are lots of projects that deal with building up confidence and skills for women, but asks where the support is for men who have been out of the labour market for a prolonged period.

Through her voluntary work at the community centre, Jaswinder hopes to secure some part time paid employment in the future. This will be helped by the fact that they know her family circumstances and will take these into account. Baljit agrees that this will be useful, and states that not many employers would be so understanding. Jaswinder's voluntary work takes place whilst Kiran is at school, which works well as both the couple agree that looking after Kiran alone is almost impossible for more than half an hour or so at a time.

The couple describe how Kiran is 'clingy' with both of his parents which makes leaving him with other people, even family members, difficult. Although his school provide an after school club and a once a week sitting service for four hours, it is often difficult to find time to concentrate solely on their youngest son, Devon. On the days that Kiran goes to after school club, Jaswinder often uses this opportunity to take Devon out for the day. She admits that she finds it difficult to leave her sons with strangers, and so her sister-in-law comes and looks after them as a sitter. This is paid for via money that the family receive from the Council which covers four hours childminding per week.

Baljit feels that the only way for the family to move forward in the future is through further education, which will hopefully lead to qualifications and better job prospects. Both Baljit and Jaswinder feel that at present their lives revolve around their children, although are pleased at the opportunity that has come about through Jaswinder's voluntary work. They worry whether they should try and leave Kiran with other people so that he gets used to being around others, but both find it difficult to trust people. Jaswinder feels that she got no help with Kiran when he was first born and diagnosed, and therefore she has got used to coping without outside help.

Both Baljit and Jaswinder agree that their life is very different to many peoples, but both feel that work and more of a social life would improve their situation. However, Jaswinder says that imagining this is difficult when they know that Kiran will never be able to look after himself. She cannot bring herself to think about the idea of ever sending him away, but also knows that unless he learns to be away from his parents Kiran will never have any degree of independence.

In terms of work, the family fear that they will actually be financially worse off if they work than if they remain at home caring for their children supported by benefits. Jaswinder points to the current economic climate and rising food and utility prices, but asks why benefits have not risen in line with these increases. She also states that she didn't receive the higher rate of disability living allowance for Kiran until he was 4 years old, and then only when a neighbour pointed out the family were entitled to it. Ultimately, neither sees the point of working if they will be penalised financially, if the other consequence of this is that they get to spend less time with Kiran and Devon.

The key issues for the family as defined by the Councillor:

- **Caring responsibilities;**
- **Lack of flexible jobs to allow them to manage the caring responsibilities;**
- **Having very few qualifications;**
- **Feel that there is no support for men to develop confidence and skills to get into work;**

- **Neither parent has belief that it will pay to be in work and manage the stress of work and the needs of the children.**

Interview 7

Nimo Mussah, a single mother of approx. 40 years of age, lives with 11 year old daughter, 2 boys aged 9 and 6 years of age, all of Somali background. Nimo has a rare blood condition which leaves her in constant pain and often unable to move and 2 of her children have inherited the condition. The interview took place at the family home with translation provided by Newham Language Shop.

Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit covers the rent and council tax for Nimo. Her income levels as estimated to be the following:

- **Income support - £160 per week (£640 pre month)**
 - **Child Benefit - £46 per week (£184 per month)**
 - **Disability Living Allowance - £40 per week (£160 per month)**
- Total: £984 per month**

Nimo arrived in the United Kingdom about 11 years ago after the war in Ethiopia left her needing international help. She has 2 children aged 17 and 18 from a previous marriage living alone in Ethiopia and their father is no longer alive. Her current husband, the father of the 3 young children aged 11, 9 and 6 lives in Africa and is unable to join them as his mother is unwell, he has visited twice. The last time they were in communication was in 2001.

The family currently live in a 2 bedroom flat on the 5th floor of a tower block run by a housing association. The family have no complaints about the overcrowding. Nimo is grateful she has a place for her children.

Nimo's health has deteriorated significantly and she has a blood disorder which she is unable to manage well due to the side effects. She is constantly in pain and it has restricted her physical mobility. She is unemployed. Nimo has no formal qualifications as she did not attend school and has not been able to take up employment.

In Somali, the notion of disability is not recognised as a concept, rather a persons 'illness' might receive attention. There is a perception that declaring disability will mean that Social Services will take children away from families if it is know that parents are not able to cope with their children.

Due to the severity of Nimo's illness, the services were proactively offered to her. She gets help with picking up and dropping the children off to school. Some days she will get help with cleaning the house when her situation is particularly bad. She has a care package from Social Services which she says she is very grateful for and which has a positive impact on the lives of her children.

Disability Living Allowance was discussed, Nimo wasn't sure which component she received but she was grateful for the benefits she received. She was not worried about

entitlement as she doesn't have much expectation and by nature does not seek to increase material wealth, her condition means that she feels she may die at any point in time and these things do not matter to her. She has had a benefits assessment and has been told she is receiving the right benefits.

The concept of poverty could not be clearly articulated in Somali and the discussion focused on low income. Nimo does not see herself as living on low income, she is aware that the children don't have everything all the other children might have.

"Whatever I have I make do with, I prioritise whatever needs to be brought and I'm grateful for it. My religion means that we accept whatever God gives and make do with it and so my children have to make do with what they have."

She is not confident about whether her income levels will improve her life. She is very worried about her children and her health. She worries she is not able to be a mother to the children because her illness limits her in so many ways. Her movements are restricted and she is constantly in pain.

"How can you be happy if you can't look after your children, if you can't even look after yourself, I'm incontinent"

Nimo has a sister who lives in Tower Hamlets, she is also unwell herself and they aren't really able to support each other. In discussing how much contact she has with the wider community in her locality, Nimo says she is too unwell to be out and about. On days when she does feel better, she wants to focus her energies on her children. Nimo says she has good neighbours who are always very helpful and they all get on well.

Debt is not a part of her life. She would not take a loan or borrow money even if she desperately needed it. The guidance from her faith means that she would be held accountable for the money she borrows from others and is not able to return, this is forbidden, and given her circumstances she feels she may die soon and does not wish to leave this world with debt.

"I would still be held liable if I die, my faith does not encourage this."

Discussing learning and achievement and gaining employment. Nimo says she dreams about doing everyday things, being able to go out to work and being able to provide for her children would be a dream come true.

"I dream about taking my children to school, I would love to do things but I'm in constant pain and this really restricts what I can do."

The children are expected to make use of the school opportunities but she often does not have the energy to help and support them or understand what it is they have to do. She worries about them.

She says it would be nice if the family could be united and everyone could be better at supporting each other. She is currently not in contact with her husband although she has some contact with her children in Ethiopia who are aged 17 and 18.

“The children would have a father who can maybe work”

In thinking about plans for the future, Nimo says she makes do with what she has and doesn't know if she will be well enough to live the next day. She is unable to think and plan.

“Who knows what can happen tomorrow, sometimes the pain is so sever that I think I will die tomorrow. I'm always worried about the children. Nobody can change my situation.”

Nimo has contact with Social Services and the last time they visited was in December 2008. Talking about finding information, Nimo says she would ask the Social Worker if she needed information. She is grateful for the service she receives.

Nimo threw away the old carpet to have them replaced. When the carpet shop arrived with the carpet, they were unable to put the carpet down as the floor was uneven. Environmental Health have said they will replace the old tiles on the floor to make the floor more even, this was 4 months ago and she is waiting for the housing association to replace the tiles before the carpet can go in.

In one of the bedrooms where there is an external wall (external wall of the bin chute chamber), there are holes in the wall with a cold draft coming in leaving the room permanently cold.

There is a problem with the radiator, it leaks if it is switched on and there is a bad smell which leaves the children feeling unwell. She is unable to use the gas fire in the sitting room as it is out of service. The family were unable to use the heating during the cold days.

There is also mould growth in the bathroom and although this has been reported, no work has progressed.

With no carpet for the last 4 months, a radiator which does not work and a gas fire which is out of service. The family are only able to use 1 bedroom if they want to be warm. This impacts on the children as it is their bedroom.

Nimo is aware of the internal and external decorating programme offered by the housing association in her block. Nimo says an officer came in and explained nicely in English what the plans were. She feels she did not need interpretation.

Through the discussions, Nimo made a note of the Social Fund and also the Older and Disabled Persons Decorating Programme.

Some of the key issues for Nimo as defined by the Councillor are:

- **Nimo's health condition is such that she feels she will never be able to work although she would have liked to have been able to work or at least look after her children;**
- **She is worried about the future of the children;**
- **She is unable to support her children with homework;**
- **She has no support or social networks.**

Interview 8

Suzanne is a Caribbean 30 year old single parent living in temporary accommodation due to a back surge in the permanent home. She has a boy who is 2 years old. The father of the child has a limited role to play in the up-bringing of the child and does not live with them. Suzanne has an A-level in Performing Arts, ECDL qualification, NVQ in Web-design and is currently studying Access to Nursing. Suzanne has blood pressure and has been prescribed with anti-depression tablets, otherwise she is well.

Suzanne pays £5 per week on rent and Council Tax. She is currently on benefits of £36 per week and receives Child Benefit and Child Tax Credit. Her total income every week is approximately £150. She is currently at college 2 days every week.

Interview

Suzanne lived with her mum up to the age of 14. She remembers her childhood as a house full of children. She was molested by a family friend and at the age of 14 moved to Manchester to be with her sister. She didn't tell her Mum but later moved in with a friend, this helped her as she was able to focus on her college course. At the age of 21 she moved back to London with her Mum, this was a strain for her as she could feel a power struggle between her and her Mum which led to her moving to a hostel in Islington from where she was put in contact with a housing association which facilitated a move to Brick Lane. The accommodation she was placed in was a child free block and when she became pregnant she was made homeless and moved to Leyton. "I felt isolated and alone with no support. I had to write to complain about the bad state of the house and I got moved to my permanent accommodation."

Suzanne was moved to Stepney with the offer of a permanent accommodation and again she felt alone and isolated. "I didn't know anyone and I didn't know where to go for things. It was another struggle to set everything up again – gas, electricity".

The housing officer is required to make follow-up visits as part of the sign-up of the tenancy. Suzanne was told there would be other visits but these did not take place. "I didn't know where to go for things". She was given a decoration allowance to decorate the flat. She did not have a fridge for a long time. To keep her sons milk fresh she purchased ice cubes and often used an icebox. This proved expensive but was one way of managing a desperate need.

Suzanne was studying while in Manchester and continued to study when she moved to London, she didn't get to finish the course and attempted to complete another course when she moved to Islington. "I don't want to be the kind of person who is on benefits all my life, I want to give the best to my boy, I feel like I'm not giving my boy the best"

Even though she is clearly ambitious and is working to achieve something for herself, the constant move from one accommodation to another means that she is often unable to complete activities she has become engaged in or commit to long term. The permanent accommodation means that she is able to focus. She is on a course at Tower Hamlets College doing Access to Nursing to specialise in mid-wifery.

Before Suzanne became pregnant she worked as a cashier in Woolworths. Although she had not worked there for long enough to get maternity pay, they offered her the option to

return to work after 1 year. She has used Jobcentre Plus and a recruitment agency to find work. Of Jobcentre Plus she says:

“They judge you, their experiences with other people means they treat you very rudely. They are not very helpful; I don’t go to them because they are of no real help”

Her interview skills are good but she feels her application form completion stage is weak. She has attempted to use on-line job search tools but does not have access to the internet. Friends and family often sign into accounts she has set up and pass her information about what has come through to her account.

“I got my sister-in-law to find out about courses for me, I was told to go and enrol the next day and I had to take my son with me. He stayed in his push-chair while I went through the enrolment process”

Suzanne is currently in temporary accommodation due to a back-surge in the block, this has occurred a number of times and has damaged a lot of valuable items most of which belong to her son. She has not been in the new flat for long and is struggling with setting things up including the gas and electricity which is fob system and already had debt from the previous user of the fob. She feels unsettled here as she has finally become familiar with the neighbours in the permanent accommodation which is a ground-floor accommodation. The struggle of this sudden move has caused many disruptions including not being able to attend college due to contractors needing access and also jeopardised her UCAS application form.

The housing officer didn’t get in touch with Suzanne after the flooding which left her feeling even more unsettled as the arrangements were uncertain and Suzanne does not know when the works will be completed and when she would be able to move back into the home. When she contacted the office, the staff did not know what was happening and were unable to help her. The housing officer had gone on sick leave and nobody knew what was happening. It is also proving much more expensive as she is having to pay for travel expenses to go to college etc.

To get a discounted Oyster card Suzanne needs to show proof of her college course. “I don’t do enough hours to qualify to be able to get a discounted card”

Suzanne still doesn’t have any furniture or a cooker in the house. When she was in temporary accommodation, she cooked her meals. She currently depends on her mother to provide her with meals. Otherwise she has to resort to fast food which she says isn’t healthy and is costly in the long run. She also doesn’t have a washing machine which means she has to wash all her clothes by hand.

Suzanne gets support from her mum who also works and often works unsocial hours. Friends and family are often the point of contact for information and support ideas. “If I see anything in the doctors surgery, I try to follow this up. If I use other services, I get to meet other people/parents, I can share things, otherwise I feel like it’s all my problem and that I am the problem.”

The Health Visitor and GP notice boards, are good for information. “I did find out about Childrens Information Service through the GP notice board, they were not able to help me with child care as my child was under three and they don’t deal with children under three.”

Most of Suzanne’s’ old friends are settled with partners or don’t have children. Some of them are in Manchester. Moving in and out of accommodation doesn’t allow for long term friendships to form. “Generally I don’t get much adult conversation; some days it might just be a ‘phone conversation.” Suzanne has a mobile ‘phone but has limited credit to be able to make calls.

“I got involved in this (scrutiny review) because I saw an article in the paper (East End Life) and it’s been really good and I hope it benefits lots of people, I was also able to meet other women like me through the focus group”

Studying can be a challenge with a child, her son no longer sleeps in the day and this can be very draining as all work has to be undertaken once he has gone to sleep by which time Suzanne can also be drained. The boy used to suffer a lot from ill health, he had a lot of colds and flues. He also used to have a bad skin condition which meant his skin was always dry. Suzanne thinks this is related to his diet and the condition of the house when they where moving in and out of temporary accommodation. “I try to give him a balanced diet but I can’t always buy balanced foods. When I do get fruit and vegetables he can eat it all. The other day I got lots of fruits and he ate 3 apples.”

It’s hard living on the income I have, I’m struggling to make ends meet. I don’t go out and I don’t buy clothes because I can’t afford it.”

Suzanne focuses on buying food and clothing for her boy and will eat what is left over from her sons’ meal.

The college staff were very good at sorting out the child care for her son and Suzanne says it’s helped to enable her to attend the course. They very quickly sorted out the arrangements and the fees. She’s not sure what will happen come September when she goes to university which is a 3 year course with an additional 1 year 6 months to specialise in mid-wifery. “I’m confident about this course and want to complete it.”

The Resource Centre at Arbour Square doesn’t have crèche for part-time students and it does not allow parents to take children in with them.

The father does see the son but is often late to arrive.

“He tends to leave Joe to his own devices and often wouldn’t feed or change him. I don’t trust him so I have to arrange childcare.”

A list of potential barriers were read out to Suzanne and she made the following comments:

- Not having enough money is a struggle
- Child care – day places seem to cost more – this will be a challenge when she goes to university
- The feeling of being isolated, this can also affect her health
- Her health – Suzanne is on depression tablets. She finds she has been breaking down more frequently, it’s affecting her sleep and her eating habit.

Suzanne defined the following issues as key barriers for her:

- **Child care and the costs of it;**
- **Making ends meet on low income;**
- **Socially there are issues about single parents, single parents can be stigmatised;**
- **Employers are not flexible and almost always not child friendly so it's difficult to find jobs that would be flexible;**
- **Some of the course materials are on-line, with no inter-net access and no computer or lap-top, this is a real challenge;**
- **Susanne's course hours means that she is currently completing a few too many hours to be entitled to a discounted Oyster card;**
- **There are no opportunities to meet and support other single parents.**

Appendix B

The London Child Poverty Pledge

The Pledge

We will do more to help London's poor families to raise their incomes and to improve outcomes for poor children and their families.

We will work to ensure that...

...as an employer, our policies and practices enable London's parents to find and progress in suitable and fulfilling jobs; to balance work and family life; and to earn a decent wage.

...parents and their families receive continuous and comprehensive support as they enter, stay and progress in work.

...children, parents and families do not experience difficulties or delays in accessing support due to avoidable bureaucracy or boundaries between services.

...the needs of all poor families are understood and reflected in our strategic plans and priorities.

...the impact and effectiveness of services is maximised, and outcomes for poor children and families are improved, as a result of strong partnership working with local and regional partners.

...child poverty remains a priority across all relevant areas of our work, promoted by a 'child poverty champion' on our senior leadership team.

...all families – including the most disadvantaged – experience high quality service from skilled and responsive staff, who understand the contribution that their work makes to ending child poverty, and can identify which customers are parents and tailor their support accordingly.

...the views and experiences of children, young people and parents, including those from disadvantaged groups, shape the services we develop, commission, fund or deliver.

...services are continuously improved on the basis of robust evidence about what works in tackling child poverty.